Mining Camp Medicine

Physician-Adventurers of Early California

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IN THE EIGHTEEN-FIFTIES, in the wake of the great California Gold Rush, an eastern writer traveled the length of the famous Mother Lode. He reported to his readers: "The entire countryside resembles a battlefield. The earth has been torn up for hundreds of miles along the banks of rivers and streams. Heaps of sand and gravel dot the landscape presenting a remarkably dry and sterile appearance. Sagging shafts perforate the hillsides. The great placer mines of California are practically worked out."[10]

This eye-witness account may well have surprised easterners, but it was hardly news to thousands of frustrated Forty-niners. Stranded amid the exhausted placers, they wandered aimlessly through the Sierra foothills searching for new diggings. Many had become discouraged and returned to their homes in the East with pockets empty. Some had settled down as merchants in the cities and as ranchers in the valleys of California. A few, and they were indeed few, had made their strikes and retired as wealthy men. There remained a nucleus of hard-nosed Argonauts who refused to give up the great adventure—the chase for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Among them was a liberal sprinkling of physicians who would spend the next twenty-odd years following the great cycle of boomtowns extending from California to western Nevada and back to California again.

It has been estimated that upwards of fifteen hundred physicians joined the Gold Rush. The title "Doctor" was often used loosely on the American frontier, and in the California mining camps every conceivable type of "healer" appeared. Among the qualified graduates of eastern medical schools and European centers marched an army of eclectics, hydropaths, phrenologists, botanics and some who swore allegiance to no particular school of thought but merely issued themselves a diploma and hung out a shingle. Of this array of talent and fraud, many returned to the civilized east after "seeing the elephant." There they resumed their practices and there they could in later years, reminisce, as did one Doctor M'Collom, over the greatest adventure of their lives. He wrote: "I went to see . . . it was wild . . . a hare-brained adventure . . . in looking back there are no regrets. . . . With California, and all that is in it . . . I quit even."[7]

But many gold rush physicians remained in California. Some settled in the booming cities of San Francisco and Sacramento. Others established practices in the smaller towns springing up throughout the state. From their numbers would come the leaders of medicine on the Pacific Coast who would organize professional societies, establish schools of medicine, and constitute the medical backbone of the new state.

But also among these pioneer men of medicine was a small army of physician-adventurers, both regular and irregular, who chose to remain in the gold fields and to adopt the mining camp as a way of life. They were a colorful lot. They left no monuments bearing their names nor do they appear as the founding fathers of the various medical soci-

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eties. They remain buried as mere footnotes in rare historical accounts, but they were, nevertheless, an integral part of the medical history of California.

If conditions on the Mother Lode were primitive, the medical atmosphere was chaotic. A certain degree of courage was necessary to hang out a shingle in a mining camp, and considerable stamina was required to persist. The faint-hearted soon departed. A young British surgeon arrived early on the scene in Placerville (it was called Hangtown at the time). Purchasing a second-hand canvas tent, he partitioned it into two rooms, one for living quarters, the other for his "surgery." He then hung out a new sign:

> "Dr. Edward Willis, M.R.C.S. Surgery and Physic in all branches. Draws teeth painlessly. Bleeds. Advice gratis."

Doctor Willis drew more than teeth. Into his new office stormed the only member of the Hangtown Medical Society, a Doctor Hullings, who enjoyed a medical monopoly in the mining camp and meant to keep it that way. A brawler and a bully, Hullings frequented the numerous saloons and was known as an accomplished artist with the knife and the pistol. He was often too drunk to detect a pulse. Nature had endowed him with an incredible constitution, which enabled him to shake off the effects of a debauch and to labor like a madman, purging, bleeding and bandaging until sufficient reserves were accumulated to permit another prolonged spree. Doctor Hullings' approach was direct. The young Englishman was informed that he was an intruder—worse, a claim jumper. Swaying slightly, and smelling of strong spirits, the irate physician demanded credentials. Diplomas from the Universities of London and Edinburgh were produced. The Englishman was astounded when Hullings tore the documents to shreds and compounded the outrage by lofting a mouthful of tobacco the length of the room to splatter on a batch of pills.

In the absence of machinery for law and order, disputes in the early gold camps were often settled by unique and sometimes spectacular methods. Dueling was fashionable, and Hangtown boasted its own refinement. When Doctor Willis issued the challenge, both physicians were led to an abandoned diggings, where they were lowered into opposite ends of a deep trench. The referee clapped his hands, and the combatants blazed away. The system was foolproof—discouraging a last-minute bolt by the chicken-hearted, offering a degree of protection to witnesses from stray bullets, and affording an element of suspense while waiting for the survivor to appear. In addition, this modification assured a ready-made grave. When the smoke cleared, a grim-faced Doctor Willis emerged amid cheers and immediately took over the operation of the Hangtown Medical Society.

Courage of another type was required of Dr. C. P. Aiken of Downieville. In 1851 he found himself in the unfortunate role of attending physician for the famous "Juanita," a youthful belle of Spanish descent who was to become the only woman to be hanged in the history of the Gold Rush. The facts in this celebrated case have been the subject of considerable debate. That Juanita was Mexican, Peruvian, or Chilean has never been proven. Accounts vary, describing her as a dance-hall girl, a frail beauty, a vicious prostitute. One fact is clear: By her own admission, she had deftly inserted a knife between the ribs of one Jack Cannon, bringing to an end the popular Australian's career. Downieville was outraged. An open-air trial was immediately held in the town plaza. It was a popular court, a device common in the early mining camps which often bordered on mob action. The atmosphere was not improved when Jack Cannon's body was placed nearby in a tent where the excited populace could view the gaping wound. What began as a trial soon erupted into a brawl. A young lawyer with considerable fortitude mounted an empty whiskey barrel and pleaded the young woman's case. The crowd would have no part of his argument. A red-shirted miner kicked the barrel from under him, eager hands lifted the defense counsel from the ground and dragged him to the edge of town. There was another witness for the defense. Panic-stricken, Doctor Aiken faced the crowd. He was, he blurted out, Juanita's physician. The announcement was received with a thunderous silence. Then he dropped a bombshell. The accused was, he stated, "enciente," or, in the words of the Yankee, "with child."

Pandemonium erupted. Doctor Aiken instinctively felt of his neck as the mob roared for the same. In the frustration over this turn of events, cooler heads prevailed and it was decided to obtain consultation. A specialist was summoned. The examination took place in a small frame house nearby. As the two physicians reevaluated the case, the mob grew restless, and shouts of "hang

'em all" penetrated the flimsy walls. No neatly-typed transcript remains of that consultation. Left to the imagination is the effect of the tension and terror on examining fingers. One fact is history: When they emerged from the cabin, the specialist announced amid cheers that, in his opinion, Juanita was not pregnant. Doctor Aiken stuck to his diagnosis. But Juanita was hanged from a bridge over the Yuba River, and her attending physician was escorted to the edge of town by a grim-faced crowd, ending his career in Downieville.

Medical scoundrels infested the gold fields. Dr. Thomas J. Hodges found his way to California by way of the war with Mexico. Born in Rome, Tennessee, he joined the army as either a contract surgeon or simply a hospital orderly. Certainly he enjoyed a medical exposure of sorts, for he appeared in the various camps on the Mother Lode as a physician. He also tried his hand at gold mining. He found neither pursuit rewarding and took to the saloons, where he developed a fondness for raw frontier whiskey and revealed a certain deftness with cards. Low on funds, he wandered down to Mariposa, where he came upon a herd of mules, separated them from their Mexican owner, and was back in business. This act launched him on a new career which, although more promising, soon landed him in the state prison. Thomas Hodges was not discouraged. He took advantage of the confinement to complete a graduate course under the direction of one Bill Gristy, an accomplished bandit and badman. Feigning illness, he escaped from the prison hospital, changed his name to Tom Bell, and entered into his new profession with enthusiasm and skill.

Tom Bell and his newly organized gang specialized in stage holdups. Operating out of the foothills north of Auburn, they also ran off cattle, waylaid lonely travelers, and blew safes. As the depredations continued, the gang became notorious, and authorities were under considerable pressure to bring them to justice. Lawmen enjoyed one advantage. Bell was a striking figure. He was tall, had flowing sandy hair, and a long-past saloon brawl had left him with a badly smashed nose, a combination making for easy identification. The problem was catching up with Tom Bell.

The gang was highly organized, with hideouts and secret passwords. Often its members committed robberies simultaneously miles apart. Reportedly, on one occasion at least, the bandit leader remembered he was a physician. During a holdup, one of the gang shot a traveler. Tom Bell dismounted from his horse, removed the bullet from the victim and dressed the wound. He then galloped off to new adventures. The end finally came with the attempted holdup of the Camptonville stage near Marysville. On this occasion, the passengers fought back, and a running gun battle ensued in which the driver was wounded and a passenger killed. But the stage got through and the outlaws were foiled. Posses chased Bell down into Tulare county, where he was captured and hanged. He became a legend on the Mother Lode. One old-timer recalled, "As a doctor he was as gentle as a kitten, but as a bandit he was a bragging, swaggering bully."

One medical imposter gave up a flourishing career in crime to settle down in early-day Stockton to practice medicine. Captain Yoemans (his true name remains a mystery) was a noted leader of a band of Mexican outlaws operating throughout Southern California. Exuding charm and fluent of speech, he hung out his shingle as "Doctor Roberts." He was, he announced, an Englishman by birth and had come to California by way of Mexico. Obviously a gentleman, he became popular in the small social circle, and as his practice flourished, he happily invented another degree. Doctor Roberts claimed he was also a lawyer, thus offering the community a wider spectrum of professional coverage. He proceeded to impress the legal fraternity. Displaying an unusual knowledge of Spanish estate law, he eloquently argued a case over a disputed land title and won a favorable verdict for his client. He was rewarded with a fat fee. He became a close friend of David S. Terry, the young Southern lawyer who was to become a Supreme Court judge and the survivor of the famous Terry-Broderick duel.

As one triumph followed another, Doctor Roberts was well on his way to a successful dual career, when disaster struck. Called into consultation on a member of one of the more important local families, he displayed an appalling ignorance of basic medical concepts. Eyebrows were lifted. Whispered rumors spread around the town. His patients began to dwindle away. One local merchant, his memory prodded by the recent turn of events, suddenly recalled a stagecoach holdup of the past. The gunman, he remembered, bore a remarkable resemblance to Doctor Roberts. After a quick investigation, the physician was exposed as an im-

poster and a former highwayman who had terrorized stage lines from Panama to San Francisco.

No one was more surprised than David Terry. Defending his friend's reputation, he challenged the merchant to a duel. While seconds were being named and weapons were selected (Terry chose pistols at ten paces), Doctor Roberts quietly decamped. The duel was cancelled. The entire mystery was solved later when a Wells Fargo stage was held up in the south. One of the bandits was captured and confessed that their leader was the notorious Captain Yoemans, recently returned to banditry after a tour of respectability in Stockton.

With the exhaustion of placer mining on the Mother Lode, the gold rush period came to an end. To the stranded Argonauts, mining in the Far West appeared to be dead. Two Irishmen changed that. In 1859, beyond the Sierra over in Utah Territory, soon to become Nevada, Peter O'Riley and Pat McLaughlin struck it rich on the sterile slopes of Sun Mountain. Thousands of fortune-seekers poured over the Sierra to Virginia City. In the front ranks of this stampede marched a number of physicians who, having settled for a life in the mining camps, were prepared at a moment's notice to haul down their shingles, pack their few belongings and tramp off to a new discovery. They spent most of their careers in the boomtowns of the Far West, where, in effect, they practiced a profession within a profession. After Virginia City, a cycle of "strikes" would carry them to Aurora, Austin and Treasure Hill in Nevada, with a dozen lesser stops in between. The trail would lead back to California again, to Panamint, Darwin and Bodie.

Dr. Simeon Bishop was one of these professionals. He spent his entire life in the mining regions of California and Nevada. He practiced medicine in Columbia, Sutter Creek, Angels Camp and Iowa Hill. He joined the "rush to Washoe," opening an office in Virginia City, where he became quite prominent. He met and married the daughter of Wells Drury, a famous Nevada journalist. Bishop had an unerring eye for mineral. In 1876, while visiting a patient near Pyramid Lake, he spotted a specimen of ore on a table. Unable to conceal his excitement, he examined the rock and plagued the household until he learned where it had been found. His practice forgotten, he led a small army of miners off to the new mineral field, where they established a boomtown. But the ore petered out, the excitement died down and he returned to his medical duties.

Doctor Bishop hated cities. He tried it once. He moved to San Francisco, where he attempted to practice in a more civilized atmosphere. But he couldn't stand it. "A home in the city," he reported, "is made up of a man, somebody else's wife, and a dog—all in one apartment." He returned to the mining camps. There he never bothered to keep books. He rarely sent bills. But he always claimed that his reward came later in life when, as superintendent of an asylum for the insane in Reno, he received a monthly check in five figures from a grateful inmate.

Dr. George Hoyt was nearly seventy years old when he appeared in Virginia City. He was a printer by trade, a physician by profession. As experience had taught him that mining camps were often flooded with doctors, he went to work for the *Territorial Enterprise,* Nevada's pioneer newspaper. There were certain advantages to life as a tramp printer. One of them was that immediate employment was almost always assured. In addition, as today, physicians were expected to maintain a degree of temperance, whereas members of the newspaper fraternity, notoriously a hard-drinking lot, were cheered for their exploits with the bottle. Hoyt became an associate of Mark Twain and Bill Gillis and spent many an evening with them at wine in the local pothouses. On one occasion, printer Hoyt was reminded that he was a physician. A smallpox epidemic swept the Comstock. Doctors were swamped. Doctor Hoyt hung up his printer's apron, dusted off his black bag and joined in the medical rounds. Working furiously day and night, he himself contracted the disease. Mark Twain and Sam Gillis were lounging on C Street one day when they spotted the weary doctor. They greeted him.

"Go back, you fools," Doctor Hoyt called. "I've got the pox. Don't come near me."

He took a watch and chain from his pocket and placed them on the ground.

"I'm going to the pest house. If I die, I want one of you to have these. You can draw straws or pitch a coin for them. Goodbye, boys."[6]

But Doctor Hoyt recovered, and when the epidemic subsided he returned to his job as a printer.

Before the California legislature passed an anti-quackery law in 1876, mining camps were a bonanza for medical irregulars. One bogus doctor, whose name has been lost to history, arrived in

Bodie by a devious route. He had been the proprietor of a stage station in the Pahranagat Valley of Nevada when, in 1866, Governor H. G. Blasdel stopped over for the night. After dinner, the honored guest became quite ill. As there were no doctors within a hundred miles, the station manager did what he could to help. He noted that the symptoms torturing the governor resembled a condition common to horses, one that he was often called upon to treat. Repairing to the stable, he fetched a bottle of his "Equine Elixir" and with a good deal of prodding and prying administered a stiff jolt to the patient. Somewhat to his surprise, the governor arose the next morning in the best of health and, praising the talents of the station keeper, continued his journey.

But fate proved cruel to the one-time hero. By 1876, he had lost his stage business and had appeared in Bodie, broken in spirit as well as in purse. Recalling his flair for therapeutics, he hung out a shingle and, adding the letters M.D., he was in business again. As his practice flourished, he was soon treating aches and pains with results as gratifying as when he had nursed his horses afflicted with the epizootic. But again misfortune struck. He was hauled into court and charged with violating the new anti-quackery law. He proved to be a man of many talents, for with the eye of a barrister he spotted a grandfather clause in the act which specifically exempted anyone who had engaged in the profession, by prescribing or treating, for more than ten years before enactment of the statute. He testified that he had prescribed and treated and had, indeed, effected a cure of the Governor of Nevada eleven years earlier. He was acquitted when he triumphantly produced, as evidence, a crumpled newspaper account of the incident.

Mining camp physicians sometimes faced situations that would have curled Wyatt Earp's moustache. Dr. J. W. Gally settled down in the mining camp of Tybo, Nevada, in 1866. He was the town's only physician, and as he prospered he became part owner of the Two Gee mine and acquired a cattle ranch. Popular and respected, he was nominated for the office of justice of the peace. Tybo was booming and law enforcement was weak, a combination that created an agreeable atmosphere for some of the worst scoundrels on the Pacific Coast. This tough element was pleased with the prospect of a harmless physician occupying the bench. They trooped out to vote for him, and the doctor was elected in a landslide.

But Doctor Gally dispensed justice as objectively as he had prescribed potions and powders. He proved immune to politics and bribery, and even threats failed to influence his verdicts. A new era had arrived in Tybo. In some quarters it caused near panic. On one occasion, chaos broke out in the courtroom when opposing parties drew pistols and threatened to settle the argument in a gun battle. In the uproar, the gavel pounded loudly. All parties turned to view the judge holding a shotgun, hammers cocked, and the muzzle trained on the courtroom. Somewhat shaken, all returned meekly to their seats. At this turn of events, the local toughs gradually departed town in search of greener pastures. Soon, Tybo's gold disappeared from her ore and the population drifted away. Doctor Gally sold out his interests, packed his family and belongings in a wagon, and headed for Watsonville, California, where he hung his shotgun over the fireplace and returned to the practice of medicine.

Bodie was probably the wildest mining camp in the history of California. The discovery of rich gold deposits there in 1877 sent thousands of eager boomtowners into the sagebrush hills of Mono County, where affairs of the knife and the pistol were of almost daily occurrence and led to the claim that Bodie could boast a "man for breakfast" every morning. Her medical men proved equal to the challenge. Arriving early upon the scene, Doctor T. S. Blackwood was sent into action immediately. He presided over the demise of "U. P." Jack Breslin, who had failed to survive a gun battle. U. P. Jack (the initials were derived from the Union Pacific Railroad, whose construction camps he had terrorized before drifting west) had staked out a claim as the camp's chief thug. In a battle with one James Blair over the coveted title, the two toughs held onto each other while blazing away with their pistols. Blair won the war but was hauled off to Doctor Blackwood's office, where the frontier physician boldly amputated a shattered arm. The local press reported, "Doctor Blackwood has as adornments in his office pieces of bone extracted from Blair's arm. He fondles them with the greatest delight. The operation was a success."[2]

The flamboyant Blackwood was constantly appearing in the news. One day he kicked up a nugget at the end of Main Street. Investigation re-

vealed more evidence of gold. During the night, he constructed a shanty in the street and surrounded it with a wire fence. Dawn brought considerable excitement. Jumping claims was common, but street-jumping was a new twist. All Bodie was furious. The fire bell clanged and irate citizens gathered. A demand for the withdrawal of the obstruction was issued in colorful frontier language. From his shanty fort came the doctor's reply, "Go slide on your ears."[1] Thereupon the citizens attacked, and within minutes the physician's castle was a wreck. He was fortunate to escape with his life.

Doctor Blackwood's final escapade in Bodie resulted from his scientific turn of mind. It proved his undoing. In the pursuit of knowledge, he presided over a refresher course in anatomy. Sessions were held in an old cabin at the edge of town and always at night. Secrecy was essential, for cadavers were obtained from the graveyard. When the courses ended, the remains were disposed of in abandoned shafts that dotted the hillside. Unfortunately, a miner stumbled into one of the old shafts. Panic ensued. The newspapers reported the grisly murder of a young woman, and while mothers whisked their young from the streets the local legal machinery ground into action. The mystery was solved in a most unexpected manner. During the excitement, a patient had called on Doctor Blackwood. While reciting her symptoms, she had glanced at a skull adorning his desk. Suddenly she shrieked, bolted from the office, and dashed down Main Street crying, "My god, it's Millie. I'd know her teeth anywhere."[2]

Gunplay and knifings Bodie knew and tolerated, but grave-robbing was a horror new to the community. Several doctors suddenly left town on extended vacations, not to return until the atmosphere cleared. But Doctor Blackwood's flight was permanent, for he never again set foot in Mono County.

With the decline of Bodie in the early eighteen-eighties, mining excitements, for the most part, came to an end in California and the Great Basin, not to be revived again until Jim Butler and his burro discovered Tonopah after the turn of the century. Many mining camp physicians drifted away to Tombstone, Deadwood and Butte. Some retired to the lush coastal valleys of California. Few had found the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. The majority ended their careers with little in the way of material gains. There is no evidence of regret. It is difficult to equate this strange affliction with present-day standards. Perhaps the phenomenon was best defined by Shorty Harris, a celebrated prospector of a later era. Shorty had "struck it rich" several times, only disdainfully to throw away his fortunes. In his twilight years, a reporter found him living alone in the abandoned camp of Ballarat, penniless, but preparing a trip into the Panamints, where he knew of a promising ledge. The writer suggested that the old prospector might well be a millionaire—perhaps worth $10,000,000—had he lived his life differently. Shorty looked with disgust at the man from the city.

"Who in hell wants $10,000,000," he growled, "It's the game, man—the game."[3]

The old mining camp doctors would have agreed.

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